

A Boy in Eirinn

Padraic Colum

*Do Mhuinteoir de Mhuinteoiribh Gaedheal
Do Phadraic MacPiarais*

*To a Teacher of the Irish Youth
P. H. Pearse*

1913

A LETTER TO THE ONE WHO READS THIS BOOK.

Dear Little Schoolmate: —

If only it were recess, and you and I and five or six other children were playing together, what a good time we should have ! I need someone to play with today, for I have just thought of a new game, and games are always jollier when several people enjoy them together. But I suppose I shall have to turn this one into a sort of solitaire, as I am all alone in my study with nothing more human than a fountain pen for company. Not but what there are plenty of people and things less human than a fountain pen—at least, than my fountain pen. It can talk ; don't you hear it—now? Sometimes I almost believe it can think. And I am quite sure it makes me think.

It made me think of the new game. I had just said : “ Now come, we must write a letter to the little schoolmate all about the new story, which is all about Ireland,”— when the pen said : “ How much more fun it would be if we could play a game !” “ What game ?” said I. And immediately that helpful pen began to ripple out ideas till there was quite a brook.

And now he suggests that it won't be a game of solitaire after all, since here are three of us to play it together—you and he and I. He is really a very intelligent pen ; don't you think so?

The name of the game is “ A Penny for your Thoughts,” and you play it by sitting in a circle around the leader, who sits in the middle. You and I shall have to sit in a circle around the fountain pen.

Come, pen, give us the word ! Drop it into our minds as if it were a penny dropping into a slot, and let us see what will come out.

“ Why,” says the pen, “ I thought we had decided that the word was to be Ireland. Isn't that what the new story-book is all about ? Isn't that why we are playing the game ?”

So now, little schoolmate, tell us what thought pops up to answer when you hear the word Ireland ringing like a little bell at the door of your mind. You and I shall take turns at thinking thoughts, and the pen will tell us why we think them, and will make an Irish picture for us—a sort of frontispiece to this storybook.

Ready : — Ireland !

“ Potatoes !” do you say?

“ Ho, ho” laughs the pen, “ that's easy. Everybody knows that potatoes grow in Ireland ; and everybody who studies geography knows also that Irish potatoes are not Irish at all ; they grew first in America, and America gave them to Ireland. But what everybody doesn't know is how the potato drove Irishmen to America.

In the middle of the nineteenth century in Ireland, much of the land was owned in great tracts by landlords who did not till the soil themselves but leased it out in little potato farms to the Irish peasants. For the landlords had discovered two things by experience : first, that land planted with potatoes would support three times as many people as land sown with wheat ; and secondly, that land divided into small farms brought in more rent than land leased in one large farm. So these greedy landlords made their tenants plant potatoes, because the more acres there were in potatoes the more tenants could live off the land, and the more tenants there were, the more rent went into the landlords' pockets.

“ But, although the landlords knew so much, there were still a few things left for them to learn, by experience ; and one was that although people can live if they have almost nothing but potatoes to eat, they are not as strong and healthy as they would be if they were fed chiefly on wheat ; they fall ill more easily. And another thing they had to learn was that if you keep on planting the same crop on the same land, year after year, the land gets tired of the crop, and the crop gets tired of the land, and presently the crop fails. This is what happened in Ireland in 1846. The potatoes fell sick and rotted, and there was little else to eat. That meant famine, you know,—a dreadful word ; a dreadful thing. And all because of the greedy landlords who knew so much,—and so little.”

So now you know why the Irish began to go across the sea to America in such great numbers, in the middle of the last century. They were hungry ; and in America there was bread to spare, as well as potatoes.

The Story of King Brian [1]

THEY took lodgings in a bare house by the side of a road. It happened to be the night of the twenty-third of June— Bonfire Night. Now, as the morrow would be their last day on the road, and as this was their last night outside Dublin, Bartley, to celebrate the occasion, agreed to take them to the cross roads where a bonfire fire would be lighted.

They set out as soon as it was dark. When they came to the cross roads Finn and Tim saw a pile of turf and wood with old people and young people about it. A cart came from the bog and a man threw down more turf and more bog-wood. Before the fire was lighted, Finn and Tim had their first adventure. A couple of little boys were sent to get furze to put round the pile and on top of it, and Finn and Tim went with them. They found a ditch with withered furze bushes placed on top of it and they started to pull them down. But in the middle of the operations a cross old man appeared and accused them of breaking down his fences. Suddenly he produced a stick and struck at the boys. They all ran. Tim was the only one who held on to the furze bush he had secured.

As they came back to the pile they saw a blaze spring up on a ridge half a mile across the country. There was one fire lighted ! A boy that was by the pile ran into a cottage and came back carrying a lighted coal at the end of a long pair of tongs. He thrust it into the heap. The fire lighted. It reached the bogwood and leaped up into a blaze that could be seen across the country. The children standing by watched the mounting flames with wonder and delight. It was as grand a fire as Finn ever saw. The boys and girls wanted to dance but no one who could make music had come as yet. Someone sang. Then when the song was over music began. It was Tim in the shadows playing his tin-whistle. He was brought forward and the young men and women asked him to play for their dances.

Old men stayed at the ditch holding sticks in their hands, and the children stayed with them watching the flames or watching the young men and women dancing. After a while Finn and the other children played hide-and-peek away from the firelight and the crowd. Once they came back and found the whole company gathered around a young man who was holding something in his hand. It looked like a piece of iron. But somebody said that it was an ancient sword. Whatever it was it had been found in the bog by the people who had brought the turf to the fire. Father Gildea, who was with the old men, took the iron out of the man's hand and examined it. He said it was a sword and that it belonged to the time when the Norsemen were forming their settlements in Ireland. The people asked him to tell them a story of the time when that sword was used, and Father Gildea told them this : —

It was at the end of the eighth century that the people whom we call the Danes began to make descents upon Ireland. Not all of them came from Denmark, but they were from Scandinavia, of which Denmark is a part.

The people who write histories call them Norsemen. They were very hardy men and very good fighters, and they began their attacks by bringing their boats up our rivers and into our lakes and then making a dash into the country, slaying men and carrying off what they could plunder. One Norse chief made a settlement in the west and such numbers of his own people joined him there that he had the thought of subduing the whole of Ireland. But an Irish king named Malachi came alone into his castle one night, seized the Norse chief, bound him, and drowned him in the lake. Afterwards other parties of Norsemen came to Ireland ; they took possession of places along the coast, Dublin, Waterford, Cork and Limerick, and they tilled the land and built up important trading towns. As soon as the Norse settled in Ireland they and the Irish people drew closer to each other. From the Norse the Irish learnt many things in trade and commerce, and from the Irish the Norse learnt many things in literature and art. They married amongst each other, and Irish princes had Norse mothers and Norse earls Irish mothers. Irish bards made poems in praise of Norse nobles, and Norse poets sang the praise of Ireland in their own language.

In the southwest of Ireland, around Limerick, a very important Irish clan called the Dalcassians had their territory. It was the privilege of this clan to form the van of the army when entering an enemy's territory and the rear when leaving it. Two young princes were heads of this clan, Mahon and Brian, a younger and an elder brother. When the Norse entered their territory these two young men fought resolutely against them. But after a while Mahon, the elder brother, made peace with the invaders on condition that they left his territory to his own rule. Brian would not submit. He gathered his followers around him and asked them whether they would make peace with the invaders or enter upon a new war. They all declared for war. Then Brian led his followers into a forest where he formed his camp. From this forest he carried on the war ; he ate little and he slept on the ground ; he fought night and day and he made himself a great soldier. He won for himself a name that all the Norse dreaded and all the Irish loved.

Mahon became ashamed of the peace he had made and he joined Brian with the rest of the Dalcassian clan. Then they were able to make open war on the invaders ; they captured the royal town of Cashel and established themselves there. But a great battle was still to be fought before the brothers reconquered the whole of their territory. There were Irish chiefs who hated the Dalcassians and these made alliance with the Norse and a great host marched against Brian and Mahon. But the brothers were victorious; they defeated the Norse and their allies, followed their retreat and captured the Norse stronghold at Limerick.

Now when Mahon was killed, Brian became sole prince of the Dalcassians. His fame through all Ireland was great. But there was another man who was regarded as Brian's equal, and he was Malachi who had defeated the Norse in the middle and the east of Ireland and had taken Dublin from them. Malachi was an able soldier and statesman and a very noble man. He was made High King of Ireland. But he fully recognized the great abilities of the Dalcassian Prince and he made it his first act to divide Ireland into two spheres, giving the southern to Brian and keeping the northern under his own rule.

The High King of Ireland had never the authority of a modern king ; inside their own territories the princes and the lesser kings were almost independent of him, and could offer resistance to his edicts. The King of Leinster was not pleased with the decision that placed his territory under the rule of Brian, and he rebelled. Brian and Malachi joined forces and marched against the King of Leinster and defeated him in Wicklow. The Norse were again in possession of Dublin ; Brian marched against the city and captured it. He had now drawn his conquests from the south up to the middle and the east of Ireland.

Should he now make himself High King of Ireland and depose Malachi, his ally and his friend ? No doubt his ambition urged him to do it, and no doubt it was whispered to him that the time had come when the whole of Ireland should be under the rule of one strong king. Brian was not young and he could not hope to live long enough to break the power of the minor kings and princes and make Ireland a kingdom with a single ruler. But he had sons and grandsons, and these, he must have hoped,

would form a dynasty that would attract the loyalty of every part of Ireland. With the whole country united under a single king no foreigners would be able to obtain a foothold.

We do not know how much his ambition urged him, how much a dream of his youth came back to him, or how much his councillors pleaded with him. But we know that the other countries in Western Europe were on the point of finding their masters in single kings and it was time that one king should endeavour to place the whole of Ireland under a single government. Brian determined to take the High Kingship from Malachi. He formed an alliance with his late enemies, the Norse, and marched into Malachi's territory. He came to Tara, to the ancient seat of the High Kings of Ireland and demanded that Malachi should submit to him. This Malachi did. Each king retained his own territories but now Brian had the authority of High King.

Under his government Ireland became settled and prosperous. Schools and universities flourished and important works were written.

It was Brian's design to make a Gaelic Empire that would include Ireland, and part of Scotland. The Norse were still in Ireland, but they no longer troubled the life of the country, while their trade and commerce added to its wealth.

One part of Ireland Brian treated with severity—the kingdom of Leinster. He had imposed a heavy tax upon this part of the country, but he was now striving to make a treaty by which this tax would be abolished. The King of Leinster came to Brian's court at Kincora in the County Clare, and he was treated with great honour. But one day, at a game of chess, a foolish quarrel was begun between him and Brian's son Murrugh. The young Prince taunted the King of Leinster with his defeat in Wicklow and repeated the story that he had been found in a yew tree during the battle. The King of Leinster left Kincora declaring for war. Straightway he made an alliance with the Norse in the east of Ireland. The foreigners saw in the quarrel between Brian and the King of Leinster a chance of destroying Brian's power. They summoned their friends and allies from the Western Islands, from Scotland and from the coasts of the North Sea. A year was spent in preparing for the war. Malachi joined with Brian, and the Gaelic clans in Scotland sent their best fighting men to help him.

The war was decided in one battle that took place near Dublin in 1014. Sitric, the Norse King, had his armies within and around the walls of Dublin. The battle was begun by Brian and Malachi attacking their positions. Towards evening the Norse and their allies gave way and retreated across the strand towards their ships. The Irish forces swept after them and before Sitric's men could gain their ships whole companies of them were destroyed. This was the battle of Clontarf, the last great battle between the Irish and the Norse—indeed the last battle fought in Europe between Christian and Pagan armies,—for the Norse who were raiding outside their own country had not yet adopted Christianity.

But King Brian did not survive the victory that would have enabled him to establish his dynasty in Ireland. His grandson Turlough pursued an enemy far into the sea and was drowned, his son Murrugh was slain in combat, and the King himself was slain in his tent by a Norseman.

Had Brian survived his victory, or had his surviving sons been able to carry out his policy, Ireland would have become a kingdom strong enough to resist all invaders. Malachi became High King again, but after Malachi's death there was no king strong enough to rule the whole country. Brian's own example prompted one king after another to seize the High Kingship by force. For over a hundred years after Brian's death there was discord in Ireland. The absence of a strong government enabled the Normans [2] who had just conquered England to invade Ireland in 1169. Dublin was made the capital of a Norman-English government whose policy it was to keep Ireland in an unsettled condition. But it took four hundred years of warfare to reduce the Irish princes and lords to submission.

The Eve of St John.

So well were they entertained by the sight of the fire and by the songs, the dances and the stories, that Finn and Tim were reluctant to leave. Hartley came and told them it was time to go home ; they rose to their feet, but then a new log was flung on the flames and Finn delayed to watch the effect. Bartley, in the meantime, strode away. Finn turned to go, but then a youth was thrust into the circle of the fire-light and Tim wanted to hear his song. When it was finished the boys started after Bartley, who was

now out of sight. They came to a cross-roads without having caught up to him and Tim was of the opinion that he had gone to the left and Finn thought he had gone straight on. A man with a couple of dead rabbits came down the road that crossed. "Eh, mister," said Tim, "did you meet a man on the road you've come on?"

"I did," said the man, "he's straight before you."

Without waiting to consider that the traveller might be another person the boys started after him. He was walking quickly and he kept his distance for a half a mile of the road. Then they started to run after him. Finn and Tim were breathless when they came up with the traveller; then, behold, he was not Hartley at all!

It was past the middle of the night and they were on an empty road. Tim said the best thing to do was to go back to the place where the road crossed and take the other turning. Keeping to the middle of the road so as to be at a distance from the mysterious hedgerows, the boys ran back. They came to the turning and took the other road. Still running they fell over something that was in the middle of the way. It scrambled to its feet and then went clattering along the road. It was a donkey that had been sleeping in the middle of the thoroughfare. The boys were excited by this encounter—so excited that they passed without noticing the house where Bartley had taken lodgings for the night. They took breath and began to run again.

And now Tim noticed a very strange sight—lights moving across the fields. They ran on, and when they looked behind them they saw the lights crossing the road. Nothing would induce Finn to go back, for when he saw the lights he thought of the fairies. The boys ran faster and faster. And the lights that made it impossible for them to go back along that road were held by a party who had come out with Bartley to search for them.

And now they were on a strange road and in all the wide country there was not a sound to be heard, there was not a house to be seen. They came to a cross-roads with a sign-post and Tim hoisted Finn up to read the inscription,— "To Dublin, fifteen miles."

Tim recovered his spirits when he found that Dublin was such a short journey. "We'd get there tomorrow by walking," he said. "We could find your grand-aunt. Your uncle will know that we went on and will follow us tomorrow. And if we keep on the straight road he'll overtake us."

The chance of reaching Dublin made the prospect less frightful for Finn.

"Come on," said Tim, "we'll march to Dublin our lone selves. Hurrah for us!"

The spirits of both were aroused and they started from the sign post talking and telling stories. But after a mile of the road Tim's own courage drooped. It was a frightening thing to be in the middle of a silent country at an hour when human beings knew it was advisable to be shut up in houses. An owl flew past them. Then two hounds came along, softly and quietly. They were on a hunting expedition of their own and they did not bark at the boys nor turn towards them.

"Look!" said Finn. There was another light before them, but this they knew was not supernatural. It was a fire in a field by the side of the road. No one was by it; it had nearly burnt out but there were heaps of wood beside it. Tim and Finn came near the fire and they felt it was company for them. They put more wood on it and took hay from the cocks in the fields and sat down at it. An Irish terrier that had been sleeping somewhere near came and put his head on Tim's lap. When the fire blazed up and when they were comfortable and near sleepiness, Tim told Finn wonderful stories. He told him of fires lighted in the middle of forests and of elephants coming and kneeling around the blaze, and of black men creeping near and chaining the elephants one to the other, so that when they ran they got tied up in the trees and the black men came and cut off their tusks. Then, after the elephants had gone, swarms of parrots flew down and sat round the fire and talked and talked. Then they would get angry with each other and begin to fight and in the morning there would be nothing beside the fire but a heap of feathers. Tim assured Finn he had read all this in books.

The terrier slept and Tim stretched himself out on the hay and slept too. Finn thought he saw a flock of green parrots sitting round the fire. Then he, too, slept. When he wakened it was broad daylight and a pig had come up to them and was rooting at the hay. There was nothing for them to do but start on their journey and take the little terrier (they named him Tiger) with them. Where would they get their breakfast ? Tim explained how a breakfast could be provided. All they would have to do would be to catch one of the goats that were near and milk her. A full drink of milk would be as good as any breakfast. They had no vessel to milk the goat into but they could get the loan of one from a cottage. Meantime, Tim undertook to show Finn how the goat should be handled. He came near enough, but when he made a grab at the hair of the goat he got a pucker that knocked him off into a ditch. Then Tiger began to bark at the assailant, and such a row was made that the boys had to hurry off.

They did another half mile and Tim became more hungry. He pointed out to Finn how easy it would be to capture one of the ducks that were gobbling along the roadside ; and they could kill it and cook it when they were farther on their way. But when he tried to catch one he was astonished to find how wary a bird a duck is.

Then he was quiet for a part of the road and Finn made him listen to his plan—it was that they should sit by the roadway and wait until Hartley’s cart came along. And if the cart didn’t come soon they could go into one of the cottages and explain how they had become separated from Hartley. Finn was certain that the people would know Hartley’s name and would give them breakfast.

But this plan was too mild for Tim and he declared he was going to rob an orchard. For another half mile of the road the boys discussed the robbing of orchards, Tim talking loudly about his exploits in that direction. Sooner than Finn wished they came where apple trees appeared behind a garden wall. The apples were small and unripe but Tim did not appear to notice this. He commanded Finn to take Tiger farther down the road and tie him up. When Finn came back the plan was perfected. They were to attack the orchard from the side of the field where the wall was low and they were to approach the point as Indians would approach it ; in single file, that is, one after the other. Tim went first and when they were a sufficient distance from the road he gave the word to climb. They climbed the wall hastily and found themselves above a house that looked quite deserted. They jumped down and made for the nearest tree. Tim shook it but no fruit fell ; he shook it more energetically, but still the apples remained upon the boughs. Then he commanded Finn to climb. He was in the fork of the tree when an event happened that made him shake so with terror that apples fell from the branches. A man appeared at the window ; he had a gun in his hands and both Finn and Tim saw him put a charge into it and ram it down with a ram-rod.

Finn heard Tim cry, “ Oh, sir, don’t shoot us.”

“ Shoot you,” said the man, “ I’ll blow a hundred holes through you if you don’t do my bidding. March into the house.”

Finn slid down from the tree, and very warily the pair went towards the house and entered a wide, disordered kitchen. There was a big laundry basket in the centre of the floor. The man with the gun appeared.

“ Each of you take a handle of that basket,” he commanded.

Finn took one handle and Tim took the other.

“ Take that basket to the village,” said the man, “ and leave it at Mrs. Mulligan’s, the washer-woman’s.”

Still holding the gun in his hand he marched them out of the house, opened the garden gate with a key and let them out on the road.

“ Tell Mrs. Mulligan from me,” said he sternly, “ that if the clothes are not back by Wednesday—by Wednesday, mind—I’ll shoot all belonging to her. Go !”

The boys ran down the road with the basket between them. They heard the man say, "Remember!" and when they looked back they saw him tapping the gun in a way that had significance for them as well as for Mrs Mulligan.

Tiger barked as they came to where he was tied. Very hastily Finn unloosed him, and with the basket between them and Tiger following them they went quickly to the village.

Finn comes to Dublin

THE question of breakfast was easily settled after all. When Finn and Tim had left the laundry basket with Mrs Mulligan and had properly impressed her with the dire message from the man with the gun, they turned down the village street and found themselves gazing into a shop that had a heap of bread upon its counter. The bread was in penny squares that had a fresh smell.

"Would you eat a fresh square, Finn?" Tim asked.

"I would," said Finn.

Tim thereupon walked into the shop with Finn behind him. "I want two squares of fresh bread," said he, "and you might put butter on them, and how much will it all be?"

The man signified that fourpence was the charge.

"Maybe you could give us a pennyworth of milk too," said brave Tim, and he handed up a shilling out of the pound he won at the circus.

"Sevenpence change, please," said he.

The shopman gave the boys bread and butter and two cups of milk, and the change to Tim, who counted it carefully. Then the pair went and sat on a bench outside a carpenter's shop to watch for Hartley's cart. It did not appear. A little stream flowed past the house at the other side, and painted cartwheels were lying in it, steeping until the wood filled their iron rims. Before the workshop were big wheelbarrows all painted blue. A man came out of the work-shop carrying a big slate-colored pigeon box of six holes. He left it on a bench and wrote on it with chalk "for sale."

"Eh, mister," said Tim, "what's the price of that pigeon box?"

The man wrote on it, "Five shillings."

Tim said no more about it. Then the man turned to the boys; he was small and had a hunch on his back and wore a little apron.

"Are you a good speller?" said he to Tim.

"Ask this young fellow," said Tim, indicating Finn.

"I'm going to ask him," said the man.

"What book are you in?"

Finn said he was in the second, meaning that he was in the second class at school.

"Can you spell 'knife'?" asked the man.

Finn spelled the word, leaving out the initial K.

“ You’re wrong,” said the man with the apron. “ K,n,i,f,e spells ‘knife.’ Can you spell ‘eel’?” Finn knew that this word was one of the conundrums that elderly people save up to puzzle children ; nevertheless he felt that the word had no right to spell itself any other way than “ e,l.”

“ You’re wrong again,” said the man, “ ‘E,e,l’ spells ‘ eel.’ ”

Finn had never seen a word that began with two ee’s before, and he had grave doubts about the man’s information.

“ Are you any good at sums ?” the examiner inquired.

“ I’m middling good, mister,” said Tim.

“ Well then,” said the man, “ if a herring and a half costs three halfpence, what is the price of half a herring ?”

“ A ha’penny,” said Tim.

“ You’re wrong,” said the man, “ and one of you is as ignorant as the other.”

But he was joking, of course, as any child can see. He went into the shop then and Finn and Tim could see him through a window planing a board.

After a while they got up and stood in the middle of the road watching for Hartley’s cart.

Many vehicles came through that village but none of them was the familiar red-and-blue cart. Then Finn and Tim turned round and took the road for Dublin. The day was bright and fine, and Finn, although he was about to venture into a strange city without his guardian, was not very uneasy in his mind. The fields had been mown and with their cocks of hay standing here and there they looked very tidy. The birds that had been in their nests a week ago were now in the hedgerows and on the empty roadway—young thrushes that did not know whether to fly or to run and that had remarkable, spacious and speckled breasts ; young robins that had no red on their breasts at all, and young wrens that could hide behind a little ivy leaf. The young jackdaws made a great noise as they came down, branch by branch, from their nests in the great elm trees. Finn’s eyes took in the particulars of the birds, while Tim, as they went along played upon his tin-whistle.

They bought bread and butter again and ate it under trees at a place that was not far from Dublin. While they were resting, a ballad-singer came along the road and saluted Finn and Tim. He was an under-sized fellow with drooping red moustaches. He swung a stick and he carried a sheaf of papers on which songs were printed.

“ It’s a fine day, boys,” said he.

“ It’s a fine day, indeed,” said Tim, “ and would you tell us, mister, if we’re on the right road for Dublin ?”

“ Believe you me,” said the ballad-singer, “ you’re on the leading, straight, direct road for Dublin. I’m going there myself.”

“ Let us go with you,” said Tim.

“ I’ve no objection—no objection at all in the world,” said the ballad-singer.

They inquired if he had seen a cart of the description of Hartley’s but he assured them that such had not come within his vision. The boys started off with him then, the ballad-singer straightening himself up for a march, Tim lengthening his steps to keep up with him and Finn trotting behind. Tim produced his tin-whistle and played several tunes that were greatly appreciated by the ballad-singer. He offered in return to sing any song they fancied off his bunch of ballads. Tim chose “ Poor Old

Horse,” and the ballad-singer stopped in the middle of the road to start the song. After the first stanza the three moved together along the road: —

“ My clothing was once of the linsey woolens fine,
My mane it was long and my coat it did shine,
But now I’m broken down, and in the street I go
To endure the winter’s cold with hail, rain, frost and
snow.
Poor old horse you must die.

“ Once I was sheltered all in a stable warm,
To keep my poor bones and my life from all harm.
But now I’m grown old and nature must decay.
My master often growls and one day I hear him say,
Poor old horse you must die.

“ ‘ He is old, he is cold, lazy, dull and slow,
He eats all my hay and breaks all my straw.
Neither is he fit for my chains to draw,
Cut him, whip him, kill him, skin him—to the hounds
let him go
Poor old horse you must die.”

“ My flesh unto the hounds I do freely give,
My body to the huntsmen as long as I do live.
Besides those active legs of mine that ran so many
miles.
Over hedges, meadows, ditches, fences, gates and
stiles.
Poor old horse you must die.”

“ The last verse is very pathetic,” said the ballad-singer, “ listen to it, boys : —

“ All nature did its best—it did its best and worst,
All nature it can do is to turn me into dust.
Do not think it hard, not neither a disgrace
If I compare my suffering unto the human race.
Poor old horse you must die.”

The road now went between two gate-piers ; there were no longer hedges and ditches, there was a green level on each side. The ballad-singer sang the last stanza as they went on this thoroughfare, and then he raised his cane to salute a policeman. Finn had not seen a policeman like this one before ; he was very tall and instead of a round cap he wore a helmet on his head. Finn mentioned to the ballad-singer that this policemen presented a strange appearance to him.

“ You are used to the constabulary of the country districts,” said the ballad-singer, “ but the policemen you see now are members of what is called the metropolitan force. You are now almost in Dublin. This is the Phoenix Park.”

The ground was very green and very level and there were clumps of trees and herds of cattle. Finn saw a herd of creatures that he thought were curious goats, but the ballad-singer told him. they were deer. Some people were racing horses and a band was playing the grandest music he ever heard. Tim ran ahead, making jumps in his delight at entering Dublin, and Finn was so excited that he broke away several times from the ballad-singer who was showing him the sights of the Park.

“ That is what is called a statue or a monument,” said he to Finn, indicating the figure of a big man on a big horse. “ You might think that the figures were made of iron,” said he, “ but they are made of bronze.”

Tim was waiting for them outside the gate of the park. "Look at the trams," he was saying.

Finn saw big vehicles with people within them and on top of them, that stood waiting or were drawn along tracks on the paved street. The sight of these trams gave great satisfaction to Tim, and he begged Finn and the ballad-singer to mount one and to go on top. A bell rang and the tram started off. The tram went by a river that had high houses on each side. It was grand being on a tram, Finn thought, seeing the other trams and the cars and the crowds of people. A man came up to them and Tim took money out of his pocket and paid for himself, for Finn and for the ballad-singer, and took three tickets. He talked to the ballad-singer as citizen to citizen while Finn watched the sights. Then the tram stopped at a bridge and Finn saw other streets right and left and before him, while the throng had become greater. They got off the tram and the ballad-singer advised them to take another tram to the place where Finn's grand-aunt lived—to Carrickleary.

He showed them trams going past with that name on their boards. Had Finn ever heard of the monument to Daniel O'Connell, he asked. There it was. Finn saw the figure of a man high up in the air, and lower down, on each side, the figures of women seated. Finn noticed particularly the woman who held a sword in her hand. Finn thought these figures represented angels. He asked the ballad-singer were they not bad angels, and he explained that he thought they were because they were black. The ballad-singer assured him that bad angels would not be put around the statue of so good a man as Daniel O'Connell. They were not angels at all, he said, but simply figures, ornaments, as you might say, and the whole monument was black because it was made out of bronze and not out of marble. Then he pointed out another monument that was just before them—a shaft of stone that went so high into the air that the figure that surmounted it could hardly be seen—that was the monument to Lord Nelson—the tram started from beside it. The ballad-singer showed them their tram and then presented Tim with a ballad-sheet as a return for the tram-fare he had expended. When the boys got on top of the tram and looked round for him they saw him sauntering down the street.

The bell rang and the tram started off. This time Tim had to pay a good many pennies, for Carrickleary was a village outside of Dublin but was now included in the suburbs. They went past great buildings and then up streets of shops. Then they came to high houses with steps going up to their doors. How different these houses were from the little thatched cottages of the country! How rich the people must be who lived in them! They went farther and Tim showed Finn the sea, not far away, but just below them. The tram went past streets of shops smaller than those in the city, and then past other streets in which the shops were just as large.

In half an hour the conductor told them they had come to Carrickleary. They got off the tram and began to search for the house of Mrs. Ryan. Tim's inquiries put them in the way of finding it and in ten minutes Finn was reading the name over the shop:—"Honorina Ryan, licensed for the sale of tobacco and snuff."

For ten minutes more they stood outside consulting as to the next proceedings, and regarding the things in Mrs. Ryan's shop window — jars of various sugar sticks, black and white, peppermint, and brown rock; boxes of strong lozenges; bottles of lemonade and ginger beer, hanks of worsted for knitting stockings, song-books and spools of thread.

It was agreed that Finn should enter and inquire if Bartley had arrived. If he had not come, Finn was to explain how they had become separated. Finn entered after some hesitation. The shop was a step below the level of the street. There was no one behind the counter and he was left to gaze on the mounds of potatoes and the heaps of cabbages that were before him, on the barrels with loaves of bread overflowing from them that were behind the counter, on the trays with thick slabs of cake that were on the counter and on the drawers above that were marked "Allspice," "Pepper," "Cinnamon," "Snuff."

Finn knocked on the counter with his knuckles, but no one appeared from behind the door that shut the shop from the room behind. He knocked again and then Tim came in from the street, and taking up a small weight that was beside a little pair of scales on the counter knocked harder. Then the room

door was opened and a woman came behind the counter. She wore a shawl that was knitted in the same fashion as his grandmother's and she had gray hair and a kindly face.

“What is it?” said she to Tim.

“I want a ha'porth of Chester cake,” said Tim.

She cut off a rich slice from one of the slabs and handed it to him.

Finn had come up to her. “Did Bartley come?” said he.

“Bartley?” said she in surprise.

“My uncle Bartley,” said Finn, “we lost him and we thought he'd be here before us.”

“Are you Finn?” said she, “Finn O'Donnell?” She put her hands on his shoulders and then she kissed him on the cheeks.

Finn hastened to introduce Tim. His grand-aunt was puzzled by the sight of the red-haired boy, but she took both of them into the room behind the shop. She made Tim sit on a high chair and she took Finn beside her on a sofa and made him tell her about her friends in the country. But Finn gave most of his attention to the room they were sitting in.

There were pictures on the walls representing gentlemen in scarlet coats and ladies in long dresses hunting a fox; and on the mantelpiece there was a clock that had for its pendulum a child on a swing; and in front of the window a wonderful object hung—a bottle in which was a ship with masts and sails and men on her deck. The ship filled the wide part of the bottle and all Finn's ingenuity was taxed to account for its being taken past the narrow neck. The table in the centre was round and covered with oilcloth, the chairs were high and the little window looking out to the back was filled with bright geraniums. His grand-aunt often had to rise from the sofa and go into the shop.

They were sitting down to supper when Bartley came. Finn heard his voice in the shop and then he came into the room carrying the whip in his hand. He was so relieved to find the boys that he scolded them out of a sense of duty only. When Bartley came, Tim said he would go and find lodgings for himself, and he went out and Bartley went after him and gave him the money he had spent on the road, so that Tim went off with his pound intact, and his pigeon on his shoulder. After he had talked to Mrs. Ryan for a while Finn's uncle took him out to the street and showed him what were still novelties—the street lamps and the gas-lit shops and the tram-cars. The shutters were on the shop when they came back and Finn's grand-aunt was waiting for them.

[1] King Brian. He won his first great victory over the Norse in 968. In the year 998 he and King Malachi divided Ireland between them. In the year 1002 he became High King. In the year 1014 he defeated the Norse at the battle of Clontarf. He was killed after this battle.

[2] The Normans. They came into Ireland in 1170.

A boy in Eirinn ([c1913])

Author: Colum, Padraic, 1881-1972

Publisher: New York : E.P. Dutton & Company

Language: English

Digitizing sponsor: MSN

Book contributor: New York Public Library

Collection: newyorkpubliclibrary; americana

Source : Internet Archive

<http://www.archive.org/details/boyineirinn00colu>

Edited and uploaded to www.aughty.org

January 31 2011